

Continuity Or Discontinuity In Evangelical History?

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Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s. David W. Bebbington. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989, reprint Routledge, 1993.

The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities, eds. Michael A.G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart. Nottingham, England: Apollos, IVP, 2008.

American version: *The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities*, ed: Michael A.G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart. Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008.

Charles Wesley's "And Can It Be?" includes a verse now usually omitted:

... My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

Still the small inward voice I hear,
That whispers all my sins forgiven.
Still the atoning blood is near,
That quenched the flaming wrath of heaven.
I feel the life His wounds impart,
I feel my Savior in my heart.

No condemnation now I dread...

Was Wesley's direct assurance ("I feel") new to the eighteenth-century revival? Back in 1989, David Bebbington's groundbreaking history of evangelicalism was published, which argued that personal

experience as the *basis* for joyful, uninhibited assurance was a departure from the tendency of the Puritans to base assurance on "evidences" of salvation. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* soon became established as a standard text. Its strengths included comprehensive breadth, reliance on primary sources, the author's understanding of the movement as a "participant observer," a refreshing clarity of style, and the courage to break new ground in interpretation. It was the emphasis on discontinuity with the Puritan and Reformed tradition which was quickly recognized as the most contentious element of his analysis.

Evangelicals have often assumed an unbroken tradition of biblical, gospel-based Christianity, reaching back in time through the eighteenth-century revival, the Puritans, the Reformers, the Lollards and other dissenters, and then right back to New Testament Christianity. Bebbington acknowledges elements of truth in the thesis that there has been a continuous witness to biblical truth through the two millennia since Christ. But he argues that the evidence points to a more subtle and nuanced history. Far from being a static, unchanging movement ("Billy Graham is the apostle Paul wearing a suit and tie"), evangelicalism "has altered enormously over time in response to the changing assumptions of Western c...

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